

A

DISCOURSE,

OCCASIONED BY THE DEATH OF THE

RIGHT HON. CHARLES JAMES FOX,

DELIVERED AT THE

UNITARIAN CHAPEL IN ESSEX-STREET,

October 12, 1806,

BY THOMAS BELSHAM.

A PATRIOT's steady course he steer'd:
Midst faction's wildest storms unmov'd,
By all, who mark'd his mind, rever'd:
By all, who knew his heart, belov'd.

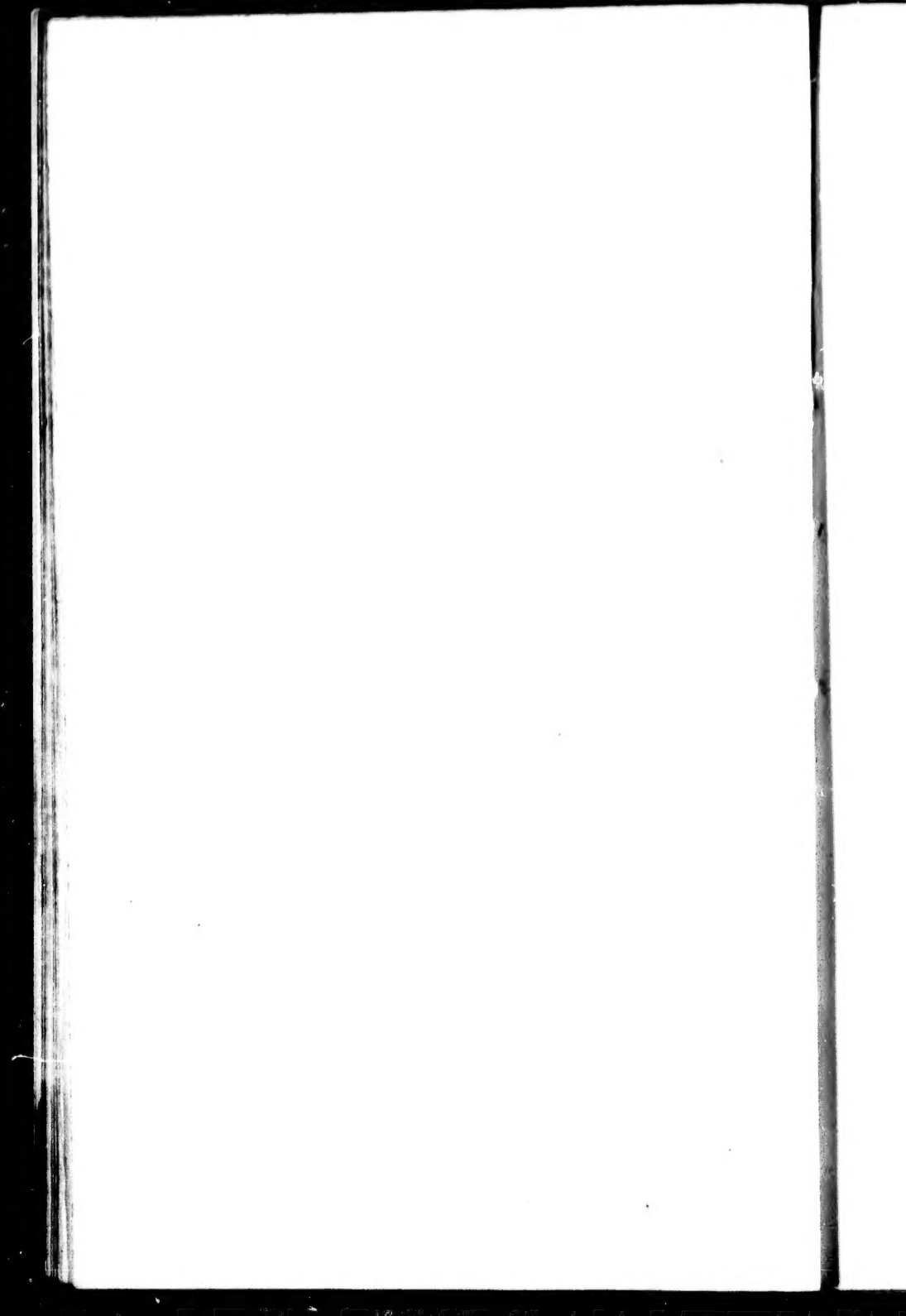
Inscription for Mr. Fox's Bust at Woburn Abbey.

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1806.



ADVERTISEMENT.

THE reasons which induced the Author to take public notice of the much lamented event which gave occasion to this discourse, are assigned in the discourse itself. It is printed to gratify the wishes expressed by some who heard it; and to give an opportunity to others, who were necessarily absent at this season of the year, to read, what if circumstances had permitted, they would have wished to hear.

A few copies are left with the bookseller for sale.

Hackney,
October 22, 1806.

2 SAMUEL XVI. 23.

AND THE COUNSEL—WHICH HE COUNSELLED IN THOSE
DAYS WAS AS IF A MAN HAD ENQUIRED AT THE
ORACLE OF GOD.

THE character which is here given of the chief counsellor of a great prince in ancient times, can hardly fail to strike the mind as being eminently appropriate to the illustrious statesman lately deceased*, whose funeral ob-

* The right honourable Charles James Fox was born January 13, 1749, and died September 13, 1806. He was buried in Westminster Abbey October 10. The funeral procession was one of the most grand and impressive which was ever exhibited in this country. It was attended by all the cabinet ministers; by a great number of members of both houses of parliament; by the electors of Westminster, and the Whig club;

sequies have just been attended with those vivid tokens of deep and unaffected sorrow in all ranks of society, which are more truly honourable than the pomp and pageantry of the most magnificent procession; whose talents and whose virtues are embalmed in the hearts of his countrymen; and whose removal at this momentous crisis has not only inflicted a deep and painful wound in the bosom of his country, the love of which was the ruling affection of his heart, and to the prosperity of which his talents and his exertions were immediately directed, but has spread consternation and dismay over the continent of Europe, which looked up to his wise and paternal

and by many respectable individuals, some of whom came from very distant parts of the country to pay the last tribute of respect to this venerated patriot. The streets, from Mr. Fox's late residence in the Stable Yard to the Abbey, were lined with an immense concourse of spectators, who all behaved with the utmost propriety and decorum; and whose solemn deportment and dejected countenances expressed, in the most unequivocal language, the emotions of their hearts.

counsels as to an oracle of God, as to the dictates of a guardian angel, who was commissioned to put an end to the miseries which it has so long endured, and to restore order and tranquillity to a suffering world. And, had it pleased the Arbiter of events to have prolonged his life, what might not have been expected from his brilliant talents, his healing counsels, and his philanthropic exertions! But it was not the will of Heaven that mankind should enjoy those blessings which the counsels of this great man would probably have secured. And to the decrees of Providence in its most mysterious dispensations, it is the duty of man to bow with humble resignation. For the thoughts of God are far above our thoughts, and his ways are beyond our comprehension.

My stated hearers will acquit me of the imputation of frequently introducing political subjects into public discourses. Such topics do not often find a suitable place among the lessons of moral and religious wisdom: least

of all does it become those, who, from a principle of conscience, dissent from the great majority of their countrymen upon truths of primary importance, and who regard it as an imperious duty to profess, and teach, a theory of religion, unauthorised, not to say proscribed, by the laws of the state, to distinguish themselves as the zealots of a political party. Suffice it for them, to demean themselves as dutiful subjects of the government under which they enjoy protection, where conscience does not interpose a superior claim; and to be known as the upright and steady friends of the constitution, and liberties of their country, and of the freedom and happiness of mankind. But upon the present mournful occasion, I flatter myself that I may be excused for departing from a general rule, in order to offer a sincere though humble tribute to the super-eminent merits of the great statesman lately deceased; who distinguished himself at all times as the patron and advocate not only of civil, but of *religious* liberty. Of this, the history of his parliamentary life fur-

nishes many signal proofs. First, in the support which he gave to the application of the clergy for relief in the matter of subscription : and afterwards, in his cordial concurrence in the extension of the toleration to protestant dissenting ministers, and tutors. His zeal for religious liberty was further manifested, by the very active and leading part, which, at the unanimous request of the persons principally concerned, he readily undertook, in the application to parliament for the repeal of the test and corporation acts, and by the repeated and splendid exertion of his powers, and the ever-memorable effusion of his manly and brilliant eloquence upon that interesting occasion. Also, by his willingness in coming forward to present, and to support the petition of a small, but respectable body of aggrieved persons, for the repeal of those still more galling and oppressive statutes, by which pains and penalties of uncommon severity are enacted against those who publicly profess and teach, the undivided unity, and unrivalled supremacy of the Deity, and who impugn the popular

but unscriptural notion of three persons and one God. And, finally, by the earnest solicitude which he discovered for the emancipation of our catholic fellow-subjects, from those legal disabilities and disqualifications to which they are still liable, notwithstanding the relief which they have actually obtained from the oppression of many unjust and persecuting statutes, which reflects great honour upon the present reign, and the enlightened spirit of the times. To this may be added, as a further proof of his ardent attachment to the cause of religious liberty, the generous indignation which he ever expressed against that savage and inhuman spirit of bigotry, which, though generally restrained by the wisdom and the authority of government, has nevertheless burst forth upon different occasions, and more than once in the present tolerating reign, has attempted to crush an obnoxious sect by the fury of a lawless mob.

In all these cases did this great statesman exert his extraordinary powers, and display his

astonishing eloquence, with a fervour and earnestness which plainly proved that he was not merely acting a part, or aiming to gain adherents to his political standard. It is even certain that in some of these instances, so far from strengthening, he was actually, and in a considerable degree, sacrificing his political interests. Of this he was fully apprised. But no inferior consideration of private friendship, of party connexion, or of political ambition, could damp the generous enthusiasm of his enlightened and liberal mind, or restrain his noble and patriotic efforts in the cause of universal liberty. Surely then it cannot be regarded as improper or unbecoming, that they for whose benefit he made these generous and persevering exertions, who have in fact derived considerable advantage from them, and who would have been put into complete possession of their civil rights, if his wise and liberal policy had been adopted, should in common with their fellow-citizens and fellow-subjects express their deep regret upon the mournful

occasion, and bear their public grateful testimony to the exalted merits of the virtuous patriot, the intrepid advocate of civil and religious liberty.

If any further analogy is necessary for calling your attention to this affecting subject, I would add, that from the first origin of this religious society, many of its most respectable members *, whether in or out of parliament, have been the steady supporters, and not a few of them the personal friends, of this illustrious

* The late Sir George Saville, member for the county of York, Dr. John Jebb, and the learned Solicitor-General John Lee, Esq., men whose names would do credit to any cause, and who were all of them the public and personal friends of Mr. Fox, were regular attendants upon the Unitarian worship in Essex Street from the time when the chapel was first opened in the year 1774, by the author's venerable predecessor, the Rev. Theophilus Lindsey, till the time of their decease. The feelings of gratitude would prompt to the mention of some living characters, in no respect inferior to these, either in rank or merit—but propriety and delicacy impose a respectful silence.

statesman. It might, therefore, reasonably be expected, that in this place, an event so deeply and personally interesting as the decease of this extraordinary man, should not be passed over without notice, in some degree proportioned to its magnitude and importance.

To delineate a finished portrait of the mind of this patriotic minister of state, would require talents commensurate with his own, and an intimacy of access to his person of which few comparatively can boast. But as upon the present occasion it is impossible to avoid saying a few words upon the subject, I shall limit myself to a faint outline of his public character, the correctness of which may be easily appreciated by all who have paid attention to the state of the country for the last thirty years, and to the incidents of the public life of the late right honourable CHARLES JAMES FOX.

To an extraordinary natural capacity improved and embellished by a liberal education,

and to a quickness of apprehension which instantly seized every object that was presented to it, and which with incredible facility developed the most intricate problems, this great man added a memory richly stored with the treasures of science and literature, and well fraught with historical and political knowledge. He was profoundly versed in the history, and the constitution of his country. He perfectly understood its external relations, its connexion with foreign powers, its political and commercial interests, its financial resources, its military and naval strength. He was well acquainted with the history, the strength, the policy, the separate and relative interests and views, of those states which once constituted what has not been improperly called the great republic of Europe, and upon the just equipoise of the political power and influence of which, the liberty, safety, and prosperity of the whole was supposed to depend; and, in a word, he was ignorant of nothing which was necessary to constitute the

consummate statesman. To this was added an extent of views, a comprehension of mind, and an energy of character peculiarly his own. All these were combined with a philanthropy which originated in a natural goodness of heart, improved and extended by historical knowledge, and personal observation, of the inestimable blessings which result from civil liberty, and from a wise administration of government, and of the miseries which accrue to mankind from unjust wars, from tyranny and persecution, and confirmed by generous exertions in defence of the injured, insulted and oppressed; so that what was originally nothing more than a natural bias of the mind, became by degrees a moral principle, and grew up into a fixed habit of universal, active, and disinterested benevolence.

His eloquence, that divine eloquence, which astonished and captivated the world, consisted, not in pomp of diction nor in melody of sound; not merely in a happy selection of expressions, though the best and the most appro-

priate which the language could supply, spontaneously offered themselves to his use ; not in dazzling the fancy with brilliant imagery ; not in bewildering the understanding with plausible sophistry ; not in flattering the prejudices of his hearers, nor in exciting false hopes or groundless terrors to render them blindly subservient to party-purposes—to such unworthy artifices his manly spirit disdained to stoop. His eloquence was of a nobler kind. Plain, nervous, energetic, vehement ; it simplified what was complicate, it unravelled what was entangled, it cast light upon what was obscure, and through the understanding it forced its way to the heart. It came home to the sense and feelings of the hearer, and by a secret irresistible charm, it extorted the assent of those who were most unwilling to be convinced. And to crown all, this astonishing eloquence was uniformly exerted in the cause of liberty and justice, in defence of the oppressed and persecuted, and in vindicating the rights, the freedom, and the happiness of mankind.

Political discrimination was another characteristic of this illustrious man. In questions of the utmost difficulty and delicacy, and of the greatest importance, such as have occurred in the present age beyond any former period, his penetrating mind hardly ever failed to distinguish with the greatest accuracy the right, the honourable, and the useful ; and to steer an even course between opposite and perilous extremes. He was the friend of reform, but of temperate and peaceable reform. He was the advocate for peace ; and had his counsels been pursued, they would probably have ensured universal peace : but it was his avowed principle that even peace might be bought too dear ; when it was purchased at the expense of the honour, the liberty, or the safety of the country. Tyranny in every shape was the object of his implacable aversion ; but he was equally an enemy to licentiousness and anarchy, and was a zealous supporter of the authority of the law as the only security of rational liberty ; and in all the turbulence of the times, he seldom, if ever, failed to observe

that temperate and guarded medium in which true political wisdom consists.

And to these splendid talents, this extraordinary man added an unaffected simplicity of manners, the characteristic of true greatness of soul, and an amiableness of disposition, which won the hearts of all who were honoured with his personal acquaintance.

Such are the faint and imperfect outlines of the public character of this incomparable man. His political career is still fresh in the memory of us all. Early in life he burst forth in all his glory, like the sun in his strength, in opposition to those measures by which America was separated from this country. And when his powerful efforts combined with all the talent and eloquence of the senate, seconded by the voice of the people, and enforced by the critical and alarming situation of the country, had driven the unwise and unfortunate authors and advisers of them from the councils of the sovereign, he occupied a very important office in

the new administration which was formed under the auspices of a distinguished nobleman*, whose eminent abilities and conciliatory spirit united many discordant interests; but who, unfortunately for the country, died within a few months after he entered into office. Political cabals soon compelled Mr. Fox and his friends to quit the cabinet; and resentment for what he regarded as ungenerous treatment impelled him to a measure, which, though it restored him to power with a high hand, was condemned, perhaps, for want of attending to the circumstances of the case, too severely

* The marquis of Rockingham, who succeeded lord North as first lord of the Treasury, in March, 1782, and died the first of July following. He was immediately succeeded by the late marquis of Lansdowne then earl of Shelburne. Mr. Fox, and the Rockingham party, withdrew from the cabinet in disgust; and having formed the famous coalition with lord North and his friends, the noble earl found himself under the necessity of resigning the Treasury, and the coalition ministry succeeded in March 1783. These were dismissed December 18th, the same year, in consequence of Mr. Fox's well-known India bill; and Mr. Pitt's ministry commenced.

condemned, by the general voice of the country. Nevertheless, in the plenitude of his power, however acquired, it cannot be proved that he ever departed from those wise and liberal principles which he always professed; and happy had it been for the country had he continued to direct its counsels. But power did not long remain in his hands; and the manner in which he was dismissed from office will not soon be forgotten. Still, however, his adherents and supporters were numerous and powerful; and his active and brilliant exertions in the cause of peace and liberty were gradually raising him again in the estimation of the public, when the grand and unparalleled revolution which took place in a neighbouring country, like a terrific meteor, shot forth discord and confusion over the surrounding nations. In this unprecedented crisis, a system was pursued by this country directly the reverse of those mild, temperate, and conciliatory measures, which were recommended by this enlightened and liberal statesman; who, in a celebrated publication written

at the time in his own vindication, predicted, with a precision little short of inspiration, the miserable consequences which ensued. But so little regard was paid to his warning voice, that the country, seduced by the fascination of a delusive eloquence, as though it were under a demoniacal infatuation, hurried into the opposite extreme. And this great man, this oracle of political wisdom, was left almost alone; neglected by the court; insulted by his enemies; deserted, with a few illustrious exceptions, by his friends; by those who used to look up to him for advice, and in whom he had been accustomed to place the greatest confidence: he was forsaken by the people, of whose rights and liberties he had ever been the fearless advocate; and was almost proscribed as an enemy to his country. 'This severe discipline, so unexpected and so unmerited, gave the last polish to his sublime character. It purified his public principles. He now learned to practise patriotism for its own sake. His great mind rose superior to popular

applause: and he persevered in the path of public duty, from a proud sense of honour and conscious rectitude; from a regard to dignity and consistency of character; and from a high and generous principle of love to his country. Thus he persisted in exerting his amazing energies to enlighten, and to save from impending ruin, a people that turned a deaf ear to his earnest and benevolent remonstrances; till, in the end, truth and reason, aided by his potent eloquence, and by the testimony of sad and dear-bought experience, gained a complete victory over prejudice and passion: and this great statesman enjoyed the peculiar felicity of living to see the loftiest of his opponents giving way to the cogency of his arguments; and his illustrious rival himself acknowledging the wisdom of his political principles, earnestly soliciting his co-operation in the direction of the national counsels; and, almost with his latest breath, recommending him as the only person whose talents and energies were capable of extricat-

ing his country from an unparalleled crisis of difficulty and danger. Thus was this extraordinary man, by the unanimous voice of his sovereign and his country, summoned to take the helm of the state in the midst of a tempest, and in circumstances of the most imminent peril; and had it been the will of Providence to have permitted him to carry into execution his magnificent designs, there can be little doubt that he would have steered his important charge into a safe and peaceful harbour. But the felicity of being governed by his wise and energetic counsels was not reserved for Britain. The powers of animal nature sunk exhausted by the vigorous exertions of the mind; and the immense pressure of public business, and public care, broke down a constitution which already indicated symptoms of decay, and in a few months deprived his country of one of the most enlightened, liberal, and patriotic statesmen, which this, or any other age, or nation, could boast, before the mighty schemes revolving in his breast could

be matured and developed, and almost before any one of his wise and salutary measures could be carried into effect.

I shall now suggest a few reflections, which naturally occur from the consideration of this affecting event :

I. We may remark the excellence of the British constitution, by which such exalted characters are formed, and brought to maturity.

Whatever there be of natural talent, or genius, or innate capacity for excellence, dignity, and sublimity, if it is not trained by discipline, and called forth by opportunity, it will lie for ever dormant in the breast, and the world will have no knowledge of it, and will derive no benefit from it. Circumstances form the character. The acorn, which planted in a congenial soil, will take deep root, and grow up a lofty and a spreading oak, bidding defiance to the tempest, and standing for cen-

turies the glory of the forest ; if cast upon a rock, or buried in the sand, will decay, and perish, without exhibiting any appearances of vegetative power. Talents, it is probable, are almost equally diffused in every age, and through every rank of life : but the means of cultivation vary, and opportunities are often wanting to call them forth.

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear ;
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness in the desert air.

It was the happiness of this age and country, that the great man whose removal we now lament, was born in a class of society, and under a political constitution, which afforded genius the fairest scope. Had his lot been cast under a despotic government, perhaps the love of liberty had never animated his breast, and his splendid talents might have been employed in riveting the galling chain of tyranny and oppression. Or, if no external circumstance could have suppressed this generous and sacred

passion in his noble spirit, his powers might have been directed, and degraded, to the forming and conducting of conspiracies and cabals. Or if the ardour of his mind, and his love of glory, had prompted him openly to oppose despotic rule, he would probably have ended his life in a dungeon, or on a scaffold. In this free and fortunate country, his mighty powers were soon disciplined, and called forth into vigorous action. And in that branch of the legislature in which he early occupied a seat, he learned to combine the love of liberty with the love of order, and with a dignified submission to lawful authority. And while he poured forth the torrent of eloquent invective against those measures, which, in his apprehension, were subversive of the interest and the liberties of his country, he still knew how to restrain the vehemence of his oratory within the limits of personal decorum, of reverence for the constitution, and respect for the monarch. Thus he acquired that generous ardor, that undaunted spirit, that invincible love of rational and constitutional liberty, which raised

him to the resplendent eminence in which he was fixed, and rendered him the admiration of the world. It will hardly be denied, that a character so truly dignified as that of this illustrious statesman, in which the enthusiastic love of liberty was so admirably combined, and qualified, with a profound reverence for the laws and the institutions of his country, could have been generated under any of the present forms of civil society but that which exists in Britain, in which the rights and liberties of the people are effectually guarded, and the powers and prerogatives of the governors are rigidly circumscribed by law.

Happy Britain ! if she knows her own felicity : if she duly appreciates, and vigilantly guards, that holy fabric of her civil constitution, which having been erected by the wisdom and experience of former generations, has been cemented with the blood of her most virtuous patriots ! Thrice happy ! if, while she manifests a liberal inclination to adopt every judicious, and well digested plan of reformation,

and improvement, warned by recent and terrible example, she resolutely guards against the machinations of those (if it be possible there should be any such) who, while they profess to reform, are secretly meditating to destroy.

II. Let us not despair of the country.

A nation can hardly be conceived to have sustained a greater loss than this nation has actually experienced in the last twelve months, in its naval, its military, and its political departments: and the last may justly be regarded as the greatest of all. This nation, the continent of Europe, and the human race, are at this hour mourning orphans, bereaved of the paternal counsels of this illustrious statesman, whose measures were always directed to the liberty, and the happiness of mankind. But, though there is just cause for deep and permanent regret, there is no reason for despair. The British constitution lives. And so firmly are its parts cemented together, and so har-

moniously are its movements adjusted, that it does not depend for its existence and continued operation, upon the character and exertions of any single individual, however distinguished. When Chatham fell, pleading the cause of his country, who did not tremble for the palladium which he protected? But that loss, though great, was speedily and ably supplied. And the same causes will continue to produce the same effects. Prodigies of political talent, and political virtue, such as that, the loss of which we now deplore, do not indeed often appear. Nor is it to be expected, that the men of the passing generation will ever again behold a character equal to that which we have lost; but the rising generation may. The powers of nature are in full vigour: and as times of difficulty call forth corresponding energies, the great events which are now passing in the world, or which are likely soon to take place, will rouse, and bring into action, all the intellectual and active powers of those who may be concerned in them, and will probably give birth to talents equally brilliant,

and to characters equally exalted with any which have been known to preceding ages. In the mean time, we have reason to hope, that the spirit of the departed patriot rests upon his surviving colleagues. And the nation consoles and congratulates itself, that those honourable men * are still permitted to guide its counsels, who had the greatest share in his affection, and who were most in his confidence; who loved his person; who revered his virtues; who admired his talents; who adhered to him in all the vicissitudes of his fortune; who have formed themselves

* The appointment of Lord Howick, who has constantly distinguished himself as the intrepid advocate of constitutional liberty, whose eminent talents and nervous eloquence yield only to those of his illustrious friend, and whose character the breath of calumny has never presumed to impeach, to the office held by Mr. Fox; and the introduction of an accomplished nobleman, of the highest promise, to whom the public eye is directed with fond expectation as the genuine representative of his late noble relation, into the Cabinet; are pledges to a grateful nation that the spirit of their late venerated patriot, continues to ^{animate the} ~~government of the~~ country.

upon his model ; and who have entered into all his comprehensive and philanthropic views. While such men, to whose talents and virtues the bereaved and mourning country looks up with veneration and confidence, continue to advise the measures of government, though tears may not cease to flow, despondency will be banished : and the admirers of the late illustrious statesman, will manifest their regard to his memory, by giving a liberal and firm support to his surviving friends, while they act upon those enlarged principles, and, as far as the state of the times will admit, prosecute those salutary measures, which endeared him to all the wise and virtuous of the nation.

III. Let us acknowledge and adore the providence of God.

It is the Lord who giveth and the Lord who taketh away : and he acts according to his sovereign pleasure, without rendering an account to any, of his purposes, or his decrees.

He is the Lord, and the giver of life : he forms the curious structure of the body : he breathes into man the breath of life : and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth him understanding. He scatters the tender seeds of intellect, and talent, and genius ; and casts them into situations favourable to their growth and culture : he shelters them by his protecting care, and gradually brings them on to maturity. In the course of his providence he presents occasions to exercise and to call them forth. All are his workmanship. The venerable patriot, the accomplished orator, the profound statesman, the victorious warrior, the revered philanthropist, possess no powers which he did not communicate, and which he does not extend, or limit, or withdraw at pleasure ; for who can call him to account, or say unto God, What dost thou ?

It is a mournful consideration, that the great statesman whose removal we so deeply regret, was cut off when life was but beginning to decline, when he was in the zenith of his glory ;

soon after he had attained that exalted station which the true friends of the country had long wished for in vain, and of his advancement to which, they began almost to despair. He was removed at a very critical season ; in the midst of a very difficult and important negotiation, when all the hopes of his country were centred in him, and when the whole nation looked up to his wise and vigorous councils, for a successful war, or, for a safe and honourable peace. But in the midst of his vast projects for the prosperity of his country, and for the good of mankind—behold ! he is summoned away by a warrant from irresistible authority, and all his short-lived dignities, his benevolent purposes, and the nation's hopes, are laid prostrate in the dust.

Such was the pleasure of Him who has an unquestionable right to dispose of his creatures as he pleases ; and who orders all things wisely and well. Our limited understandings are ready to apprehend that this mournful event, at any time highly distressing, was in the pre-

sent crisis most unseasonable. But infinite wisdom determined otherwise, and fixed upon the present season, as the fittest, and the best. And though we may not be able to discern the reasons of the divine conduct, we cannot but believe that they are perfectly satisfactory, and the result of the most comprehensive views, and the most benevolent designs. This awful stroke might be intended to baffle human wisdom, and to humble human pride. The hopes of mankind were too highly elevated, and too much confidence was placed in human sagacity and power. Nothing was thought too great, or too good, to expect from those counsels, which were "as if a man inquired at the oracle of God," and from that eloquence, which bore down all opposition. But the Almighty frowns,—and all these towering expectations vanish at once; and the vanity of human confidence is written in the dust of him upon whom that confidence was placed. Thus we are taught the affecting and important lesson, "*what shadows we are, and what shadows we pursue.*"

Hence likewise we learn, that there is one Being alone, who is the proper object of national, as well as of individual confidence. He is able both to preserve, and to destroy : and it is the same to him to save, by many, as by few, by the ignorant as by the wise, by the feeble as by the strong. No harm can happen to those who in the practice of duty seek for refuge in God. In his hands they are safe and happy. And though the tenor of divine dispensations may not always accord with their limited views, let them rest assured that all will be eventually well. In the mean time let us triumph in the divine government, “ and where we can’t unravel, learn to trust.”

THE END.

Speedily will be published,

BY THE SAME AUTHOR,

AN ABSTRACT

OF THE

EVIDENCES

OF THE

JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN REVELATIONS,

IN FOUR DISCOURSES.

Addressed to the Young Persons who attend
the Unitarian Chapel in Essex-Street.

